



After the Fade, Vol. 1 (Asheverse: B-Side)

Author: *Gregory Ashe*

Category: LGBT+

Description: The music fades, but the dance goes on.

After the Fade is a collection of flash fiction stories set in the Asheverse. It includes the following:

“Analog Horror”

Vie learns something new about Austin.

“Christmas Cowboy”

Vie and Austin visit Hannah and Tyler.

“Couples Camping”

Vie and Austin go camping.

“On my Mind”

Vie has a dream.

“Faculty Party”

Emmett and Jim go to a faculty party together.

“Guessing Game”

Holloway Holmes tries to guess his Christmas presents.

“Nickelcade”

Jack and Holmes go to the Nickelcade.

“Wanted: Gay Friends”

Eli’s plans for New Year’s Eve take a turn.

Please note that these stories were previously distributed in various formats.

Page 1

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 10:44 am

Couples Camping

Hollow Folk: Vie and Austin go camping.

I

We stopped at a C-store somewhere before we reached the mountains, before dawn, to buy supplies. Beef jerky. Trail mix. A Coke for the drive. Austin kissed me when we were standing by the refrigerated case; he still tasted like toothpaste.

The old man behind the counter wore a trucker hat that said You Vote with Your Money, I'll Vote with My Gun , and he shook his newspaper to make sure we knew he'd seen us.

The door rang as a crew of boys stomped in. They were our age. They had Sheridan High School jackets and shirts. They did a lot of whispering, and the word faggot floated around like a turd that wouldn't flush. While we were waiting for the old man to ring us up, one of them, a big all-American bastard, knocked the beef jerky off the counter and stood there, waiting to see what we'd do.

"Forget it," Austin muttered to me.

And it was his vacation, so I forgot it.

We rode into the canyon at dawn, and by the time the sun was up over the steep walls, picking out each needle on the lodgepole pines, we found a spot to camp: a long, grassy stretch along a hard bank of rounded river stones, where Austin stomped

down a bed of nettles and studied everything like he'd spent his whole life outdoors. He had his hands on his hips. I could see the hollow of his throat. I was thinking I might like camping after all.

"This is the middle of nowhere."

Austin moved to check the horses, and he crooked an eyebrow at me.

"What?"

"This is not the middle of nowhere."

"I just spent God knows how many hours with a horse trying to kill me."

"Sugar wasn't trying to kill you."

"My balls are like pancakes after all the times she tried to throw me."

He looked like he was ready to tell me that Sugar hadn't tried to throw me, but then his other eyebrow went up. "Pancakes?"

"And now we're officially in the middle of nowhere."

"And your balls are flat."

"And my balls are flat."

"Poor baby."

"Yeah." I shivered, even under the heavy coat; late March in Wyoming wasn't anything to joke about. The calendar might say spring, but the mountains still said

winter. “Remind me why I’m here?”

“To spend time with me.”

“I like spending time with you.”

Austin blew me a kiss and then started working the saddlebags loose. Sugar was nosing at the grass. She was thinking about kicking me, I was pretty sure. Austin’s horse, Jimpson, looked a lot happier for some reason.

“I like spending time with you in a lot of places. Your bed. My bed. The shower.”

“The mountains.”

My nose was starting to run, and I could feel it freezing on my upper lip. “Not exactly.”

“Trust me.”

“Fatal last words.”

“Why don’t you set up the tent?”

So I set up the tent. Badly. And when Austin had finished with the saddlebags, he took over the tent. He put it up correctly. I supervised.

“Does it look ok?”

“Where do the beds go?”

Austin laughed. Then he wasn’t laughing. “Oh.”

“Yeah, I was just joking.”

“You know there aren’t beds, right?”

“Yeah, yeah. I told you I was just joking.”

“They’re called cots when you camp.”

“That’s why I said beds. It was a joke.”

“And I didn’t bring cots. I just packed sleeping bags and some pads to insulate us from the ground.”

“Yeah. Insulation.”

Austin got his arms around me. I tried to squirm away, and he kissed me on the nose. And then on the mouth. And then I wasn’t trying very hard to get away.

“Thanks for doing this. I’ve got a surprise for you.”

Arms around his neck, I looked over his shoulder at the tent. The very small tent. The very, very small tent.

“Did you bring lube?”

He laughed into my neck and gave me a joking, blow-off kidney punch. “You’re a dog sometimes.”

“So you did bring lube.”

“Got your bear bell?”

I jingled it at my waist.

“Vest?”

I undid a quarter inch of the coat’s zipper to reveal the fishing vest with snippers and line and a million flies and hooks.

“Bear spray?”

“I know I said I’d like to try some new stuff with you, but bear spray and a bear bell and fishing hooks weren’t really on the top of my sex toy list.”

He gave me a smirk that should have melted the snow for ten feet in every direction. “Maybe you need to broaden your horizons.”

“Maybe I’m a good boy. Maybe I don’t do those kinds of things.”

Austin’s throaty chuckle just about had me climbing out my skin. “Come on. I want to show you the surprise.”

He took a set of reins in each hand and started up the hill, guiding Sugar and Jimpson. I trotted around Sugar—a wide berth, in case she was still thinking about putting a hoof through my forehead—and said, “They don’t sleep in the tent, right?”

“What?”

“That was a joke too.”

“I thought you told me you’d been camping before.”

“Yeah, I have.”

I didn't tell him I'd only been once, with Gage. We'd cooked smores over a fire and slept in the back of his mom's minivan and gone for McDonald's at 5:30am when we couldn't sleep anymore.

"It's going to be fun."

I nodded. I glanced back at the horses. "But are they going to get cold?"

Austin's grin softened his features. "Aww."

"Don't make that noise."

"It's cute. You're worried about them."

"I don't want to drag a dead horse out of this canyon."

"I think it's really sweet."

"I'm just being practical. I don't want them trampling me in the middle of the night." I glanced at Sugar; her dark, liquid eyes held all of me in a reflection. "I don't trust her."

Austin laughed the rest of the way up the hill, and he was still laughing when he followed a wide trail through a break in a line of blackberry bushes. I stopped in surprise when I was what was on the other side, until he bumped my ass to get me moving again.

In front of us, maybe a hundred yards down the slope, stood a log cabin. It wasn't very big—I was guessing three rooms at most—but a gravel road hung off it like a tail, and an LP tank hugged the cabin's rear. Blue puffs of steam came off the furnace exhaust, drifting over the roof of a small outbuilding that I guessed was a stable. But

it wasn't the cabin or the LP tank or the pennants of steam trailing in the wind or the stable that stopped me there, with blackberry thorns prickling my neck. It was the car in the driveway. It was the goddamn, motherfucking Porsche planted on the gravel.

It was Emmett Bradley's car.

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 10:44 am

The Porsche on the gravel drive was a bad sign. I could feel it. It was Emmett Bradley's Porsche, so of course it was a bad sign.

Emmett Bradley. Molten sex. Runway good looks. Asshole (personality) the size of Uranus. Emmett hadn't talked to me since the hospital. Emmett hadn't talked to me, for all that it mattered, since he had put a knife into Makayla Price.

And now he was here, a hundred yards downhill, so close I could practically touch him.

"I thought this was the middle of nowhere."

"I didn't know he was going to be here, Vie." Austin had slowed, and Jimpson nudged his shoulder with his nose.

"The way we got here, through the canyon, I thought we were on our own. Wilderness." I chewed the thought for a minute, but all I could come up with was, "Middle of nowhere."

"I never said it was the middle of nowhere. In fact, I specifically didn't take us to the middle of nowhere. That's Colton's cabin. His parents' cabin, I guess. And I figured it would be better to be near a road in case anything happened. We just came through the canyon because it's scenic."

"We could have driven here. That's what you're telling me. We could have driven here, and we could have brought suitcases, and we could have slept on cots—"

“No, they’ve got beds. Not cots.”

“That’s what you’re telling me?”

“I didn’t know. If I’d known, I wouldn’t have come here.” A frown tightened Austin’s face. “Colton probably did it on purpose just to be an asshole.”

“It’s fine.”

“No, we should go—”

“It’s fine. The horse trying to throw me off a cliff and break my neck. The tent that’s going to fall down on us in the middle of the night. The sleeping bags. The insulating pads. It’s great. It’s going to be great.”

Austin stopped; Sugar and Jimpson stopped too. “This was supposed to be fun. Let’s go back. We’ll get a Redbox. Watch it on my laptop. Or just Netflix, maybe.”

I worked my fingers inside my gloves. I took a few deep breaths. At least I had enough brains to know when I was being an asshole. “No. Sorry. I just—I didn’t expect it. This is going to be great.”

“I really don’t think—”

“You brought lube, right?” I hooked my fingers in his belt and dragged him an inch toward me. “Right?”

“I mean, I packed—”

“So it’s going to be great. We’re here. I’m with you. It’s going to be great. One asshole isn’t going to ruin this.”

“Vie—”

“He’s an asshole. He just happens to be here. We won’t talk to him; we won’t even have to see him, right?”

Austin nodded slowly. His eyes mirrored the sky, drawing out the turquoise.

“Then let’s have a great time.”

So we got the horses settled in the stable, and then Austin led me deeper into the woods, away from the river and the cabin, following a well-worn trail between the lodgepoles. He held my hand. I liked how our gloves rustled, how I could still feel the bones of his hand through the padding.

“I thought we were going fishing.”

“We will.”

“I thought that was the whole point: you love fly fishing, and I’m wearing that vest Sara gave me, and some of the hooks keep poking me in the chest, and . . . what?”

“Oh. I’m sorry. Are the hooks poking you in your little chest?”

I spanked him. Once. Hard.

“Well don’t be such a pussy,” he said, laughing.

Then, breaking free of my grip, he darted forward. To my surprise, he began shedding clothing as he went: his coat first, and then his shirt. He was hopping as he took a curve ahead, already pulling off one boot.

“My boyfriend has gone insane,” I said.

Somewhere in the trees off to my right, a stick snapped. I shot a gaze in that direction. For a moment, nothing. Then leaves rustled, and a fat hare shot between a tangle of aspens.

Ok, I thought, but my heart was pounding, and the sweat on the back of my neck had nothing to do with seeing Austin hopping as he stripped off his clothes. Ok.

When I got around the bend, my boyfriend was swimming. Naked. Steam came up off the pool, curling over the rocky ledge where Austin had piled his clothes. The air held the faintest hint of sulfur and something else, a mineral smell that was strangely pleasant.

“Come on in.”

“This is the surprise?”

“The water’s warm.”

“Yeah.”

His arms wove back and forth across the water. His legs churned slowly, easily. “You’ve got to take off your coat first. Then your shirt. That’s how it works.”

He was right. That’s how it works.

The water was warm. Austin was warm. And slippery. His legs between my legs. His hands on my chest. His mouth on my neck, on my jaw, on my lips.

“This way,” he said, tugging on a part of me that was pointing like an arrow. He

grinned, and the grin got boyish, teeth pinching his lower lip.

One more tug, and he paddled around a rocky outcropping. I paddled after him. The cliff walls were sheer here. A lacework of water dripped down one, filtered through moss the color of rust. Nobody could see us here. Nobody could watch us.

“I wanted to show you something,” he said with that kiddo grin again, the one with his lip tucked up.

His hand plunged under the water.

He showed me something.

When I finished, my single, explosive grunt ricocheted up the chimney of rock, and I flopped forward, head on his shoulder as his legs continued to tread softly under us, his fingers counting knobs on my spine. I ran my hand down his belly to return the favor, and he laughed and caught my wrist.

“Just relax.”

So we drifted like that, the steam plastering Austin’s short, preppy boy hair to his forehead, the water spreading mine into fanblades across the mineral-blue surface.

“Good surprise?”

I mumbled into his shoulder.

He laughed again, and then he kicked, carrying us out of the little pocket of heat and sex and back toward the rock ledge. I let him be the motor. And then the motor pattered out.

“What the hell?” Austin’s legs faltered; we bobbed down before he remembered and kicked us up again.

I glanced over at the rocky shelf to see what had caught him by surprise. Emmett, a part of my mind warned me. And a glimmer of satisfaction ignited inside me. Good. Let him see us like this, draped together, sweat and water painting our naked bodies with light. I turned around, a smug grin on my face.

“What the fuck?”

Our clothes were gone.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 10:44 am

“I’m going to kill him.”

“Quit being such a baby and get out of the water.”

“I’m going to rip his balls off and then I’ll kill him.”

“His balls? Worry about my balls. They’re freezing.”

With a groan, I hauled myself onto the rock ledge. Freezing air snapped around me like elastic. My whole body tried to shrink.

My whole, whole body.

Austin, dancing in place, glanced up the path. “Come on.”

“I really am going to kill him.”

We ran. The path, which had seemed so smooth before, had a million pebbles and burrs and brittle stalks of winter-dry grass. And pinecones. They seeded the path like landmines.

“Let me talk to him,” Austin said as the cabin came into view. His breath steamed in the March air. His hair hung in icicles across his forehead, and his big shoulders prickled with goosebumps.

“You talk to him. I’ll kill him.”

Austin kept to the frozen dirt as much as possible, tiptoeing across the gravel drive like a cartoon character walking on fire. Maybe it'd be funny, later, seeing a naked Austin tiptoe like that. But it wasn't funny now. Now, it made me want to see how hard I could squeeze Emmett's scrawny neck.

What Emmett wanted out of me—what he always wanted out of me—was a reaction. And, nine times out of ten, Emmett got it. He'd show up drunk to a party just so I'd have to ditch Austin and take care of him. He'd show up at my house, thirsty as fuck, just to give me blue balls. He'd cut me off, the way he'd been doing lately, to see if I'd come scratching at his back door like a mutt.

Today, though, the cold air was helping. The fact that I'd just stomped across frozen dirt was helping. My head was clear, and I wasn't going to give Emmett what he wanted. I wasn't going to stand there, my balls trying to crawl up into my stomach, my nipples turning purple, and beg for my clothes back.

As Austin went up onto the porch, I trotted up the hill, making for the break in the blackberry bushes. In March, not all the snow had melted. Not even close. And no matter how much I tried, I kept coming down in it, sometimes ankle deep, and my feet first felt like pins and needles. Then they felt like fire. And then they felt heavy and dull. Bad signs. What kind of joke was Emmett playing? This was worse than just a dumb prank; it was dangerous. I'd grab a change of clothes from the tents, and then I'd go back to the cabin and break his nose. Oh these? I'd say it casually. Just some clothes I packed. Extra. Plenty warm, thank you very much. Just wanted to see how you were doing. And then bam. Flatten his nose like a fucking pie plate.

At the break in the blackberry bushes, I stopped and swore. A wind cut right along my ass cleft, and blackberry thorns sliced my shoulders and arms, but I barely noticed.

The tent was gone. The gear was gone.

My stomach flipped; I jogged back down the slope. My feet barely had any sensation, and I slipped more than I jogged, and when I caught myself on the trunk of a ponderosa pine, the bark scraped my palm raw. At the stable, I was shaking so badly that I had to wiggle the door open—my muscles weren't responding right.

But they were working well enough for me to swear again.

The horses were gone too.

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 10:44 am

Inside the cabin, I sat with my feet pointed toward the furnace, shivering inside a mountain of blankets. The blankets smelled dusty. My skin still had the sulfur trace of the hot springs. I was reasonably sure that my toes weren't going to fall off, but I didn't want to close the possibility yet.

I had been right: it was a three-room cabin. A bathroom; a main room with a galley kitchen and a pair of sofas; and a bunk room.

Emmett was in the bunk room. With Austin. Talking.

It had been Austin who answered my pounding on the door. It had been Austin wearing a UCSD sweatshirt that was about to pop open along the seams and mesh athletic shorts that did nothing to hide the fact that he was still missing a pair of underwear. Emmett's clothes. Too small for Austin. It had been Austin who got me wrapped up in blankets and forced some hot tea down me. It had been Austin who got my feet propped up toward the furnace. Austin, Austin, Austin.

And I loved him for it. I did.

But what was going on with Emmett?

"It wasn't him."

"He's a lying bastard. Of course it was him." That's how it sounded in my head; when I tried to say it, my teeth were chattering so badly that I almost bit off my tongue.

“He loaned me his clothes. I don’t think he’d do that if he were the one who stole our stuff.”

“He’s playing you.”

“Why would he lie? If he wanted to mess with us, well, mission accomplished. He’d just give the clothes back and laugh. He wouldn’t have stolen Sugar and Jimpson, though.” Something dark swam behind the turquoise of Austin’s eyes. “He doesn’t look like he’s anywhere close to laughing, Vie.”

“So what are we going to do?” Each word was broken up into fifteen pieces by my chattering teeth.

“He doesn’t have service up here, and he doesn’t want to drive back down. He looks—he doesn’t look good. He didn’t say this, not exactly, but I don’t think he can go home. Or he thinks he can’t go home. Something.”

I thought of the enormous, echoing vaults of Emmett’s house. The total frigidity of the place. It was so fucking cold that it made my naked snow dash feel like a good steam in the sauna.

“We’re not spending the night up here with him.”

Austin lifted a long, frozen tongue of my hair and bent it; it crackled stiffly. He raised an eyebrow.

“I know it’s cold outside. And I know we don’t have a tent or clothes—”

“Or Sugar and Jimpson.”

“Jesus. I’m sorry. I hadn’t even really thought about it. They’ve got to be ok, though.

Right? I mean, somebody wouldn't . . .”

“Steal a horse?” Austin’s voice was dry and light and totally, completely forced.

“That’s kind of what the term horse rustling means.”

“Maybe the door got left open and they just kind of wandered off.”

“And our clothes just kind of wandered off? And the tent?” Austin shrugged; I waited for the UCSD sweatshirt to explode into tatters, but somehow it managed to hold together. “My dad’s going to kill me. Jake’s going to kill me. But I don’t even care about that. I mean, fuck. They’re my responsibility, and I love those horses too. If something happened to them—” He cut off and shrugged again.

“We’ll call the sheriff. Or the forest service. Or the FBI. We’ll find them.”

“Yeah.” Austin rolled his shoulders. This time, I was sure I heard a seam pop, and the gray sweatshirt pulled about four inches up his belly to expose flat, taut muscle. “I better go keep trying to talk Emmett down.”

“Talk him down?”

Emmett’s dark, thick eyebrows knitted into a line. “He’s currently insisting that you wear a blindfold the entire time you’re inside the cabin.”

The furnace ticked, and another wave of heat licked my soles. I said, “He’s fucking batshit.”

“Vie.”

“He’s gone totally around the moon, that kind of batshit.”

Austin took two fistfuls of my frozen hair, and it crackled in his hands as he gave a soft tug. “I’m going to talk him down. You stay warm.”

“Yeah.”

“Just don’t come barging in there and rip his head off, ok?”

“I’m not a kid.”

“And don’t pick a fight with him when you see him.”

“You think I can’t control my temper?”

Austin sighed and gave another gentle tug, and then he pushed himself up. “Do you really want me to answer that?”

“I’m offended.”

“I think I know how to fix that.” He tugged on the too-short hem of the sweatshirt, exposing another inch of pale, muscled flesh.

I narrowed my eyes at him.

Austin laughed. He tugged on the gym shorts, exposing an inch of dark hair. Just an inch. It wasn’t the full picture, but it was enough that I forgot, for a minute, what we were talking about.

“That’s a good look for you,” Austin said, backing toward the bunk room. “Be a good boy while I take care of this.”

“I’m not your little sex kitten. You can’t distract me with—”

He tugged on the shorts again, a little lower, and I almost swallowed my tongue. Grinning, Austin disappeared into the bunk room. Emmett's voice started, and then the door shut off their conversation.

As soon as the door closed, I was on my feet. I kicked open Emmett's suitcase, which lay next to the sofa, and found jeans and a heavy sweater. I dragged them on. I found socks. Pulled them over my aching feet. I found his Sorels by the door and squeezed into them. Nothing fit: the boots were too tight, I couldn't button the jeans, and the sweater sleeves stopped an inch above my wrists. But they were clothes, and they'd keep me warm. I grabbed Emmett's heavy down coat, bundled up—as best you can bundle when the clothes are too small—and let myself out into the brilliant afternoon light.

By the stable, I found horse tracks. I wasn't an outdoorsman by any means, but the snow was still deep in places, and the tracks were fresh.

I started walking.

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 10:44 am

I found them half a mile farther up the canyon. They hadn't even tried to hide.

Four guys sat on logs around a fire.

Maybe forty yards downstream, Sugar and Jimpson were tied to a tree near the water, with the gear—tent, sleeping bags, and backpacks—on the ground next to them.

I had a decision to make.

No, scratch that. I had two decisions to make.

First, should I try to grab Sugar and Jimpson and just ride off?

Second, should I use my ability to scramble these shitheads' brains?

The answer to the first question was a very loud no.

Maybe somebody could have done it.

Maybe Butch Cassidy or Buffalo Bill or even, on a good day, John Wayne could have done it.

But I couldn't even sit on an old mare without getting my balls smashed flat and my neck near broke.

By the time I convinced those two horses not to kick my brains out my ear, the guys would reach me.

And, most likely, toss me straight into the river.

So, what about the second question.

After a long moment, I decided no.

I'd used my power on ordinary people.

Mostly in self-defense, but a few times out of anger and the desire to hurt.

I didn't like how I felt when I did that.

I didn't want to feel like that.

These guys had stolen our stuff.

They had put us in serious jeopardy—if Emmett hadn't been around, we could have frozen to death.

Two of them were wearing Sheridan High School jackets, so they were definitely bred-in-the-bone assholes.

But I didn't think they were killers.

I didn't think they were monsters.

If they got dangerous, I'd reconsider.

For the moment, though, I wasn't ready to walk into that darkness.

That raised a third question: what now?

Eyeing the gear near the horses, an idea began to take shape.

Then I studied the wooded slope of the canyon, the trees thinning before they reached the river, and I judged the position of the campfire and the two coolers these bros had packed in and the number of beer cans that were blackening on the coals.

And then I had my plan.

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 10:44 am

The only hard part was getting to the gear.

I crept along the waterline, grateful that the winter grasses here were still tall and not weighed down by snow.

Up the canyon, the Sheridan boys were making enough noise that the whole Vehpese cheer squad could have done their sideline routine without being noticed.

If I had to guess, I would have said the Sheridan boys had just figured out about beer.

And they were, judging by all the sounds, liking it.

Jimpson stared at me with glossy black eyes. He raised one hind foot. Hoof, I guess.

Sugar, my nemesis, pricked her ears. Her head inched forward. She stomped, shifted, and stomped again.

“No,”

I whispered fiercely. “Don’t even think about it.”

She shook her head. Her ears, still on high alert, twitched.

This was probably how I’d die: betrayed by a horse.

But maybe Sugar thought better of it.

Or maybe her loyalty to Austin trumped her innate desire spend the next hour trampling me.

Either way, she didn't whicker or snort or otherwise give me away.

Jimpson, as always, looked like he could have stared an avalanche in the face and not blinked.

Austin always got to ride Jimpson.

When the Sheridan boys had taken our clothes, they'd taken my bear spray, my bear bell, my fishing vest—all of it.

From the looks of it, they hadn't kept any of the stuff.

My best guess was that they'd tossed it as they went up the canyon.

But our bags were there, and I jimmied the zipper on Austin's, dug around, and came up with what I'd been looking for: a backup can of bear spray, another bear bell, Austin's hunting knife that was as long as my arm, and a spool of fifty-pound-test fishing line.

It was the same color as the pine needles, and I jammed it in the pocket of Emmett's coat.

With river stones crunching underfoot, I crept back along the bank and scuttled through the tall clumps of fireweed and past a field thistle the size of a player piano.

I had some guesses about how things were going to go.

The Sheridan boys were just that.

Boys.

Asshole boys, but just boys.

They hadn't meant to kill us, although they'd taken our clothes, so they were probably just morons.

They definitely didn't intend on keeping the horses.

Sugar and Jimpson were both branded and had trackers, and in Wyoming, horse theft carried up to ten years in prison.

They took their horses seriously up here.

So this was some kind of locker room prank.

This was boys being fucking idiot boys.

And that meant they might get rough, they might even throw a punch, but they weren't going to pull a knife or a gun.

If I left them alone, they'd probably ditch the horses and the gear and keep on their merry way—at some point.

Working my way up the sloping canyon floor, I touched the fishing line and thought about how Austin had looked when he thought he was the one responsible for losing Sugar and Jimpson.

And then I looked down at the Sheridan boys.

And I thought about the packet of beef jerky skidding across the countertop and

smacking down on the C-store floor.

And I figured boys were boys.

And maybe these boys just needed their asses handed to them.

When I reached the tree line, I cut into the rows of pine and spruce and low, scrubby juniper.

I found a fallen branch—nice length and heft, just what I wanted for my last resort.

I unwound the first length of fishing line, cut it with the hunting knife, and got to work.

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 10:44 am

The pile of blistered, golden-brown beer cans had grown at the edge of the coals. One of the boys was pissing uphill—literally—while the other three argued about Jessica Mecham’s tits, whoever that was. I picked out the leader straightaway. He was the one from the C-store: tall, built like God intended him to play defensive line, all-American blond-and-blue-eyed, and decent looking. He wasn’t in Austin’s league. He sure as fuck wasn’t in Emmett’s. But the kid really might have punched Jessica Mecham’s card—if she could stand to be around him. He looked like his name was probably Bud.

“I’m telling you,”

Bud was saying, his speech already a little sloppy. “She fucking squirted when I got done with those big old titties.”

The two boys in the audience hollered and shouted and swore like it was a revival meeting for frat bros. The one pissing tried to pump his fist, and then he swore and hotfooted it and fell. Piss went up in a golden arch and came right down on him.

Jesus Christ. These were the masterminds behind the whole operation.

“Hey,” I said.

The one who was busy getting sprinkled with his own pee had bigger problems, but Bud’s audience turned to stare at me. Bud turned a beer can in his hand, and he had a pretty good poker face.

“You’re the faggot.”

“That’s right. I’m the only one.”

Bud blinked at that. One of the audience participants said, “No, no, he was with that other fag, the one he was kissing.”

“Shut up, Tommy,”

Bud said. “What are you doing here?”

“You shouldn’t have taken our clothes while we were swimming. And you shouldn’t have taken our tent. But you really shouldn’t have taken Austin’s horses because Jesus Christ he is probably a little too responsible for his own good, and he really took it hard.”

They were still staring at me.

“He got upset,”

I clarified. “I don’t like it when Austin gets upset.”

“Look, twinkie, I don’t know what the hell you’re talking about with swimming and clothes, but those horses are mine, and—”

I didn’t want to kill them. I mean, I did, but I’d pretty much decided against it. So instead, I just blasted them with the bear spray.

The thing about bear spray is that it’s meant for bears. And it packs a pretty nasty punch. I wasn’t sure if it could kill a person, and I didn’t want to find out, so I fired the can from about fifteen yards—farther than the can directed—and just settled for giving them a misting.

I might as well have dipped the audience participants in gasoline and spun the wheel on a lighter. They screamed. They shot to their feet, and their hands were everywhere—their eyes, their mouths, their noses, patting and rubbing and flailing like they were trying to beat out flames.

Bud saved himself by falling ass-backward over the log he was sitting on.

I kept the bear spray going for the full seven seconds, and when the stream died, I walked back up the hill toward the tree line, with a few glances back.

“You—you—you—”

Bud was scrambling through the sedge, and he got a hand around a rock and pitched it overhand. It clipped Emmett’s Sorel, and I felt the dull ache in the side of my foot. Looked like Bud had a decent arm on him. “You fucking faggot.”

“We went over that already.”

The next rock winged my arm, and even with the padding of Emmett’s jacket and sweater, it felt like Sugar had landed a solid kick.

My whole arm flashed with white heat, and I stumbled.

The next rock ripped a patch of bark the size of my head from a ponderosa, exposing white pulp that bled sap.

I decided to pick up the pace a little.

Cradling my arm, I ducked between a pair of lodgepoles.

The sound of Bud’s passage up the canyon floor echoed between the narrow stone

walls.

He was breathing like a crazy man, each exhalation punctured by faggot, queer, cocksucker, cunt.

Two more stones whistled between the trees, but they both struck off a good distance from me—he couldn't see me, and he was throwing blind.

Good.

That meant he was angry and scared and stupid, and I liked all three of those.

I rang the bear bell.

And then again.

I wanted this horsefucker coming after me. I wanted him to know exactly where I was.

He crashed through the skeletal clumps of juniper like he was driving a dozer—just bulled straight into them and kept going.

I could see him now, and I moved backward, keeping him in my sight, picking my steps carefully.

I whistled low and when his head shot in my direction, I blew him a kiss.

His arm came back; I ducked behind a tree as the stone came out of his hand.

The lodgepole I was hiding behind reverberated like a guitar string when the rock hit it.

Ok. Maybe Bud didn't play defensive line. If he did, his talents were wasted.

"I'm going to fucking rip your asshole in half. I'm going to cut off your fucking cock. I'm going to—"

He hit the first fishing line tripwire and went down, and I stepped out from behind the tree for a look.

He had planted face-first on a rough slab of granite, and it had scraped his chin open.

Lying there, his head up and blood running down his face and neck, he looked like a kid who'd taken a bad spill.

He even had the same confused, hurt look in his eyes.

Like we'd been playing a game and I'd taken it a step too far. The second stone he'd been carrying had flopped out of his hand, and it lay near my foot. I tossed it off into the trees.

He spat blood. And a tooth. "I'm going to kill you."

I shrugged. "You shouldn't have gotten my boyfriend so worked up. The C-store stuff, I let that go. But the horses—well, he really likes those stupid horses."

Bud wasn't listening.

He was drawing himself up, his palms a bloody hash that left prints on the granite, his knees still bent into a crouch.

I knew even before he did what he was planning: a rush.

He was going to launch himself out of that crouch and try to catch me by surprise.

I took a careful step back. And another.

Bud took off like a Titan rocket.

I shuffled to the left. From the corner of my eye, I watched the gleam of the fishing line.

And then Bud stepped over it. Stepped clean over it. And my last clear thought before Bud hit me at something like a hundred miles an hour was that Bud might have been smarter than I thought.

Page 8

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 10:44 am

The force of the charge carried both of us six feet before I slammed up against a massive cedar, its needles prickling the back of my neck and filling my nose with their balsam. My breath exploded out of my lungs, and my head cracked back against the trunk, the whole world flashing out in a nova.

The white-out only lasted an instant. Then I was back, blinking into the shadow of Bud's fist, turning my head at the last instant so his fist skated along my jaw instead of knocking my teeth down my throat. I got in a punch of my own, a little too low to catch his solar plexus, but he still wheezed and angled his body. This kid wasn't used to getting hit, not like this. He liked to hit. But brawling like this—I got a better blow in, a right hook that cracked against his ribs—this wasn't Bud's domain.

He staggered back, letting instinct take over, pulling away from the pain. I landed a glancing punch, catching more of his belly than anything else, and my next blow just whistled through the air. Bud wound up for a jab, his whole body like an electric sign telling me what he was going to do, and when the punch took off from the shoulder, I dodged.

And Emmett's Sorels slipped in the slush.

I hit ass-first, squishing wetly into the melting snow so that I was lying on my back. Bud staggered, gathered himself, and stared down at me. He was still just a big old electric sign, every dumb thought flashing on his dumb face. He lifted a boot. He was going to smash my head into the snow, through the snow, into the grass and the thin scraping of soil and the granite underneath. He was planning on putting his boot straight through my head.

My left hand snapped out, grabbing at the branches, the needles feathering down under my palm. It was here. I'd planned for this, planned for something going wrong, planned for—

The boot started to come down. I rolled, but I was hemmed in by the branches, couldn't roll far enough. I flailed. Cedar needles stung the back of my hand.

My fingers caught a loop of emerald-green line hidden in the scaly cedar needles. I tugged, hunching my shoulder to catch the tread of Bud's boot, and the loop came free. Branches cracked; air whooshed. Bud's boot caught my shoulder, rolling me onto my back, laying me open for Bud's next stomp.

It never came.

I lay in the slush, staring up, as the branch I had hung in the cedar crashed down. It caught Bud about four degrees off center on the shoulder, whipping his head to the left, scratching open his ear and neck and ripping his jacket and shirt back to gouge his shoulder. Yelping, he staggered back, one arm slapping at the branch as though it were a horsefly. The weight of the branch carried him down, and he landed on his back, his head thunking against the granite slab.

He was breathing. And his eyes were open. And he was saying something to Jessie—Jessica Mecham, I guessed. It sounded like an apology. I figured she probably deserved one.

Hooking him by the collar, I dragged Bud out of the pines and down the canyon's slope. I left him by the fire.

Brush rustled down by the riverbank.

When I trampled down a patch of nutgrass, I could see Piss-boy squatting on the clay

shore, his heels sinking deeper as I watched, the river washing around his sneakers.

“Boo.”

He fell back with a splash, and the glacial water swept him out into the middle of the river, where he stared at me for a moment until water splashed over his mouth and he gasped and paddled toward the opposite shore.

My head was ringing from the collision with the cedar tree, and something on the trunk—the broken stump of a branch, maybe—had cut open the back of my scalp. It stung like an inch of hell. The blood soaked my hair, the sweater, the coat. I could wash my hair; Emmett could buy himself new clothes if he wanted.

When I got to Sugar and Jimpson, they were both staring at the opposite shoreline, where Piss-boy was clattering up a rocky embankment.

“Don’t worry about him.”

Sugar turned her dark eyes to me. Her head bobbed.

“You kick me, you try to run me down, you pin me between the two of you and I’ll turn you both into glue.”

Sugar ran her long face against my hand and whinnied. I left my hand there for a moment, surprised—I was surprised every time, over and over again—by the texture, the strength, the warmth.

Then I packed the gear on the horses as best I could and led them down the canyon.

Sugar bit me once, on the shoulder, when the smoke from the cabin feathered up above the trees. Just a nip. I decided it was the horsey equivalent of a love tap.

Page 9

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 10:44 am

Our breaths bloomed in the tent, white and brilliantly opaque in the lamplight. Austin squirmed a little closer to me in the sleeping bags we had zipped together.

“Your feet are warm,” he said.

“Your feet are cold.”

He stuck them between mine. Two blocks of ice. How could a guy this hot have feet that cold?

Resting his chin on my shoulder, he said, “You shouldn’t have gone alone.”

“I had bear spray. And Sugar and Jimpson were there.”

“Without me.”

“You were dealing with Emmett.”

Dealing with Emmett. That was the nicest way I could say it. Negotiating with the greedy, miserable, selfish bastard so that he wouldn’t toss us out naked into the cold and let us die. That was a little more accurate. So that he wouldn’t make me wear a blindfold the entire time I was in the cabin. So that I couldn’t even see him, much less talk to him.

“Relax,”

Austin said, squeezing my shoulder. “You’re letting him get to you.”

“Ouch.”

“You told me about the crack to the back of your head. And that guy hitting you. What happened to your shoulder?”

“Nothing.”

“You just said ouch.”

“It’s just bruised. It’s nothing.”

Austin’s hand drifted lower and rested on my belly. He scratched the trail of nearly-invisible blond hairs.

I made an interested noise deep in my chest.

“Good thing you found our bags.”

I grunted. He just needed to move his hand a little lower.

“And good thing I packed the lube.”

I grunted again, and I took his wrist lightly and slid his fingers down a few more inches.

He laughed. Then his touch slid up again to my belly. “Don’t jump the gun.”

“You are fucking awful sometimes.”

He kissed my shoulder. His hands teased the blond trail below my navel. Applied pressure. Rubbed, firmly, a circle that didn’t go quite far enough south.

“You’re a fucking monster sometimes.”

“You shouldn’t rush into things.”

He kissed higher up my shoulder. “Alone.”

Another kiss, sliding toward my neck. “Without even telling me.” His stubble rasped the side of my throat and I trembled. I shook like a fucking leaf.

“Aus, come on.”

“I’m trying to teach you to slow down a little.”

“Fuck,” I moaned.

Then something moved outside of the tent.

I bolted upright, knocking side Austin’s hand, his touch forgotten. Footsteps came toward the tent. A single pair of them, and they were hard to make out, as though the person was trying to keep us from hearing. It was Bud. He’d decided he wanted round two. I slid out of the sleeping bag, laid a finger over Austin’s mouth, and shook my head. Then I squirmed to the tent door and worked the zipper in millimeters, holding my breath, trying to keep the nylon shell from shivering.

The footsteps came closer.

The zipper got hung up somewhere. I swallowed a curse and jerked it. Softly. It came free, but then the zipper rasped loudly along its track, and someone swore out in the night, and footsteps clapped up the canyon floor.

I ripped the zipper open the rest of the way, and night rushed in like a wall of ice. A

black shape drifted toward the top of the hill, framed for a moment by the blackberry bushes. There was no moon, but the air was so clear and thin up here that it magnified the starlight into a silver radiance that dripped off every leaf and blade and stone. And I knew who was up at the top of the hill. I knew those slim shoulders. I knew the way his torso pivoted at the hips. I knew the taut line of his jaw against the starglow.

“That fucking pervert was trying to—”

I swallowed the rest of it when I saw the clothes: mine and Austin’s, neatly folded in front of the tent, with the bear bell and the bear spray and the keys and the fishing vest and everything else. Even socks and shoes. I touched my jeans, and the denim was still warm. It had been inside. For hours. Soaking up all the ambient heat of the cabin.

The night air made me shiver, and I grabbed the clothes and stacked them inside the tent and glanced up at the break in the blackberry bushes, and he was still there, squatting, elbows on his knees, watching.

And you can’t tell anything about a person from a distance like that at night, not even with the starlight flooding the mountain air. Even if he looked like the loneliest guy in the world, even if he looked like he was just regret and sorrow held together with catgut, even if he looked like he wanted to say he was sorry—that this, dropping off the clothes like this—was the closest he could ever get to saying sorry for a stupid prank—well, it didn’t matter what I thought. You can’t tell anything about a person. Not at a distance like that. Not at night.

I was a psychic, and I still didn’t have any idea what the hell went on in Emmett’s head. But I figured maybe I should cut him some slack. Maybe I hadn’t realized how bad things still were for him.

“What?”

Austin finally whispered. “Is it those Sheridan dicks again?”

I jerked the zipper back along its track, sealing us in darkness, and crawled into the sleeping bag again.

“Now your feet are cold,”

Austin grumbled. “What was that all about? Are those our clothes?”

I rolled on top of him, pinning his wrists against the tent floor, and felt him harden underneath me. “Fuck yeah,”

he mouthed, bucking up against me, his chest up-and-down with a flurry of breaths.

“I believe,”

I said, tightening my grip around him with my knees, bearing down with my weight, letting my voice drop low and rough like the canyon, “we were having a lesson about patience.”

And then I kissed him.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 10:44 am

Hollow Folk: Vie has a dream.

In the dream, I was running, the way I ran every morning. It was one of those dry days at the end of summer, the prairie grass burned white, the air crisp and clean because the sun was still coming up. Just me, and the wind pressing against me like a hand, giant fingers drawing lines through the buffalo grass. The highway was empty except for me. No semis hauling ass. Nobody running cattle. Not even any joggers—not that there ever were, not this far.

He was a dot when I first saw him. Just a dot. But I knew.

Emmett was a darkness first, and then an outline trimmed from the sky, and then he was Emmett: the dark hair, the lean muscle, raw sex rising from him like smoke curling over a fire.

“Fuck off,” I panted as I passed him and kept running.

“Right back fucking at you!”

The highway followed the curve of the land, and I lost him behind a hill. My steps beat the shoulder of the road. Gravel crunched under my soles.

When I crested the next rise, he was there again. Sitting on his ass this time, arms around his knees. He had to know it would bother me because it was the only possible reason he’d do it, but he was chewing a stalk of grass like he was Huck Finn or some bullshit like that.

“You’re not—” I had to gulp air. “—supposed to be here.”

He shot me double eagles, and the long morning shadows made it impossible to read his face.

I passed him, and the gravel sounded like water sloshing underfoot. The road snaked around a low hill, and I looked back at the turn. He was still there, head tipped back, that fucking piece of grass bent like an arrow in the wind.

I ran harder. Sweat poured down my face. My chest burned. My legs hurt, and then they were numb, and then they were dead. The road climbed another swell, and when I came over the ridge, he was there again, sitting in the middle of the road. His legs made a vee at the double yellow lines.

One of the things I was working on with my therapist was not getting caught up on stuff. The fucked-up thing about dreams, though, was sometimes they ended up being a lot like metaphors. I thought Mr. Spencer would be proud of that. Then I thought I was supposed to call him Jim now.

I dragged myself the last twenty yards at a walk, hands at the base of my spine, the wind blowing my sweat-damp hair out behind me. I felt like if I spread my arms, it would pick me up, carry me. It made a sound in the grass. In Oklahoma one year, the cicadas had gone wild—something about all the different populations hatching at once. The sound had been enormous, enough to make you go crazy for a couple of weeks, and then it had been over. The wind was like that, a little—without the bandsaw buzz at the end of the cicada’s song, but never letting up. Some things come, I thought, looking at him sitting there like a horse’s ass, and they just keep coming.

When I reached him, Emmett said, “I told you you’re getting fat.”

I wiped my face with my shirt. He looked; he didn’t try to pretend he didn’t. He even

smirked and waggled his eyebrows.

“You should have seen yourself coming up that hill.”

I turned into the wind and lifted the hair off my neck.

“Huffing and blowing.”

I eyed him.

“Probably because bubble-butt keeps you on such a tight leash.”

A minute passed. I fanned myself with my shirt. He was still staring up at me, grinning, and finally I said, “What?”

“What what?”

“What do you want? Why are you here?”

He shrugged.

“Emmett, come on. This is the third time.”

“Don’t look at me; I’m not the fucking psychic.”

“We can’t keep doing this.”

“So, knock it off.”

I smothered a growl. “I can’t. It doesn’t work like that.”

“Sounds like an excuse.”

“It’s not an excuse. It’s a fact.” He didn’t say anything, so I said, “Do you know how many colleges there are in the US? How many other colleges? Do you know how many there are just in Wyoming? And none of them means you have to sleep five miles away from me.”

Emmett rolled his eyes. “Baby.” He stood, stretched, touching the hem of his shirt to draw my eye as the fabric rode up bronze muscles. When he finished showing off, he grimaced. “Do I really have to do this?”

“It’s my dream.”

“I hate running.”

“So, leave.”

“I don’t run, tweaker.”

“Great. Get the fuck out of my head.”

“Does it look like I’m dressed for running?”

“You’ve got until five, and then I’m going without you. One.”

It was a dream, so one moment he was still in jeans and a tee, and the next, he was in a scoop-neck tank top that said **WARNING: ERECTION OVERLOAD** and little white ripstop shorts, the kind that would have gotten him arrested—or murdered—if he’d worn them in the waking world. He was barefoot, of course. He could get away with bullshit like that in a dream.

We ran together.

“It probably says something about you, doesn’t it?” He was already sucking air; Jim let him spend half the day on the couch, and it showed. “That big tweaker brain, and it’s empty as hell inside.”

The sun was coming up. It picked out his hair, highlighting each tuft, accentuating tiny strands of bronze and copper and gold, little tawny hints you never would have noticed if you didn’t watch him enough, if you never saw him when the sun came up. He caught me looking, and the sun made a crescent of light in his eyes.

“Well,” I said, “it’s not totally empty, is it?”

Page 11

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 10:44 am

Flint and Tinder: Emmett and Jim attend a faculty party together.

“I hate parties,” I said as I checked myself in the visor’s tiny mirror. I looked jaundiced in the weak yellow light, and my hair was shit.

“You love parties. I seem to remember hearing about the parties you used to throw. Usually followed by a list of students who were being suspended.”

“I like parties where stupid people drink way too much and do stupid things, and I get to sit there and laugh because Donovan is pounding Westin’s face in for looking at Layton’s ass, and Taylor is puking into a Tupperware container because she’s, quote, ‘allergic to tequila,’ and there’s definitely, at a bare minimum, an awkward hand job happening under somebody’s coat.”

Jim was giving me a look.

“What are the hand job odds tonight?” I asked.

He flipped the visor up like that might be the end of the conversation.

“Why can’t we be the good kind of age-gap couple?” I asked. “Why can’t we eat dinner at five, and then you fall asleep with your bib still on, and I steal all your money and get cornholed by a string of increasingly ’roided-out pool boys until one of them murders me and pawns my watch?”

Jim didn’t sigh or pass a hand over his face or anything. Because he was Jim. He adjusted my collar and said, “You look very handsome.”

“Of course you’d say that. You’re afraid I’ll leave you for a younger man.”

“We only have to stay an hour, and then we can go.”

“The ’roided-up one is going to choke me to death with his thighs.”

Jim pulled me in for a quick kiss and said, “Thank you for doing this.”

I rolled my eyes. But then I kissed him again.

It was an old Victorian house on a street of old Victorian houses, and the cold came whistling down like a knife. I should have worn something more than a white button-down and dark jeans, but I was trying to go for conservative and minimalist and respectable. Those were important traits when you were substantially younger than your partner and you were attending the faculty Christmas party and meeting his colleagues for the first time.

Fortunately, we only had to stand on the porch for a moment before a girl in a white button-down and black pants answered the door. She was holding a tray of canapes, and she smiled as she welcomed us inside.

When I tried to sneak back to the car, Jim caught my arm.

“I look like I’m one of the catering staff,” I whisper-shrieked as he drew me into the house. The girl with the canapes had continued on her way, and for a moment, we were alone in the foyer.

“No, you don’t.”

I stared at him.

Jim lasted about five seconds before he touched his throat and looked away, which was slightly mollifying. It was nice to know I still had it.

“You don’t look like the catering staff.” I could hear the effort in Jim’s voice, how hard he was trying. “In the first place, you’re wearing jeans—”

“Stop.”

He put his hands on his hips. The grandfather clock (because of course this house had one) ticked restlessly. Words soft, Jim said, “Okay, we can go.”

“No.”

“It’s fine, Emmett.”

I groaned. “No.”

“It’s not a big deal.”

“No, no, no. We’re already here. And you look so fuckable.” And he did: the boyish part in his strawberry-blond hair, that perfect jawline, the way his blazer set his shoulders and arms on display. Everything about him down to his shirt printed with tiny Christmas trees. “I’m going to be a good boyfriend. I’m going to make sure everyone sees that grooming one of your students to become your sexual partner has lifelong benefits.”

Jim’s eyes got wider and wider with that particular sentence.

I smirked.

He sounded like he was being strangled when he said, “Emmett.”

“Just keeping you on your toes, dear,” I said as I kissed his cheek and headed deeper into the house.

The party was already in full swing; it looked like the entire faculty had showed up. The old Victorian had a lot of little rooms instead of one big living space, and each little room was decorated with a different theme: the sugar-plum fairy room, the gingerbread room, the Santa’s workshop room. The last one was a little disturbing. The elves wore shockingly revealing jumpsuits and had a lot of suspiciously shaped tools, and I thought they were about one whip and St. Andrew’s cross away from Santa’s BDSM dungeon. Somewhere, a simmer pot was simmering, filling the air with the fragrance of citrus and clove and pine. There were too many people, and although the house had seemed comfortable at the beginning, now it felt stifling.

People stared, of course. If I’d been somebody else, they would have stared because I’m way better looking than Jim, and I was clearly out of his league, and the polite thing to do would have been to assume I was an expensive sex worker. (Okay, fine: Jim was out of my league.) But because I’m me, they stared at the scars. They tried not to, but they couldn’t help themselves. To be fair, half my face was scars, so it wasn’t exactly easy.

Jim introduced me to men and women, and I smiled and nodded and asked polite questions. The conversations settled into familiar routines: gossiping about colleagues, or complaining about students, or telling stories about parents. One poor woman told us that she was still fielding questions from one father about whether she had a litterbox in the classroom (no, she did not, but the man was sure she did because Fox News had told him so). People stopped staring at me—or they didn’t stare quite so much. Jim’s arm felt easy around my waist, and I was surprised when I burst out laughing as the woman finished her story by telling us that she’d put a bag of clumping cat litter on her classroom wish list.

Some of it, I was willing to admit, was the wine, and after a while, I had to excuse

myself to find the restroom. I was making my way down the hall, checking doors, when hands settled on my ass and squeezed.

I spun around. The man was sixtyish, red nosed, and to judge by his breath, swimming in eggnog. He blinked owlishly at me as though his eyes weren't quite focusing, and then he let out a gusty, "You look quite fine," as he pawed at my crotch.

I batted his hands away. I should have been shocked or horrified or appalled, I guess, but the unreality of it made me want to laugh. The best I could manage was "Hey!"

"Do you know who I am?" The words were thick and slurred. He wobbled and then almost crashed into me. He caught my belt with one scaly hand. "I am the head—" He hiccupped. "The headmaster. And that means, tonight, I'm your boss, and you'd—you'd better do what I say."

The catering staff, I thought. These stupid clothes, and he thinks I'm part of the catering staff.

I opened my mouth to say something, to try to explain, but before I could, two things happened:

I caught a whiff of burning wool.

And the headmaster screamed.

He stumbled back, spinning, and I caught a glimpse of his suit jacket—which had caught fire at the hem. Jim was there a moment later, beating the flames out with his hand. Enthusiastically. The poor headmaster stumbled around, staggering into the walls, shrieking, as Jim beat his ass red. Jim kept going even after the flames were out, but I figured that was a safety protocol.

The poor headmaster had to be carried upstairs to lie down. As he was hauled up the stairs, I heard him moaning, “My derriere.”

Jim looked at me.

I looked at Jim.

“Something to say?” Jim asked.

“Did I ever tell you,” I said, “I love parties?”

Page 12

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 10:44 am

The Adventures of Holloway Holmes: Holmes tries to guess his Christmas presents.

Holmes weighed the present in one hand, studying the TNMT wrapping paper as though it might hold a clue. Then he looked up and said, “A wireless charging device.”

“H!”

“Am I wrong?”

“Give me that!”

I put the present back under the tree and scowled at him. I tried to remember I was happy. I was happy that I was here, now, and it was Christmas, and Holmes was with me. He’d chosen to spend the holiday with us, although it wasn’t clear to me how much of the choosing was actually his—he and Dad had several long conversations about it (quite rudely, I’ll point out, without me), and I got the vibe that going home for Christmas, whatever that meant for Holmes now, might not be an option. When I tried to weasel information out of Dad, though, he’d dodged and ignored and finally told me (again, super rude) to mind my own business.

And I was happy to be here, and happy to have Holmes with me. Really with me. Last Christmas, when I thought grief and pain would literally kill me, felt lightyears away. The cottage was warm, even with snow piling up around us (it was still coming down, actually, and it made the late afternoon feel like evening). Holmes had helped me decorate the tree, and he’d loved the ornament I’d bought for him last year—a Double Double from In-N-Out, with a tiny frame where I’d put a picture of us. It was

a goofy one. Dad had taken it of us when we'd been studying, and I had devil eyes and Holmes looked like if I got one more chemistry equation wrong he'd levitate off the couch and burst into flames. I was obsessed with it. So, yes. I was happy. Very happy.

Admittedly, it was getting harder to remember how happy I was when Holmes got bored and kept guessing all his presents.

"Keep your hands off them," I told him. And, just to be safe, I scooted the presents deeper under the tree. They had a huddled, fugitive look that wasn't quite in the Christmas spirit.

"I don't need to touch them, Jack," H said with bizarre earnestness. "Also, I think the organization of the presents would be more pleasing if you put that Xbox controller—"

"Ha! Why would I get you an Xbox controller when you don't have an Xbox?"

"I was going to say you could put that Xbox controller with the Santa presents hidden in your father's room, and then tomorrow, he can bring it out when you surprise me with the Xbox."

I didn't say anything for a few seconds.

"Jack?"

Somehow, I got to my feet. I stalked over to the kitchen. Dad was pretending to read the paper while he baked cookies. When I got closer, he said, "Deep breath."

"Do you hear what I have to put up with?"

Dad flapped the paper and held it a little higher, but it didn't hide his smile.

"I'm glad you think this is amusing."

"Only a little."

"I'm glad watching your only child be devastated at Christmas brings you such boundless joy."

"Holloway, was he always this dramatic?"

"Oh, yes, Mr. Moreno."

"Traitor!"

Holmes's smile was there and then gone again, a breathtaking cut-glass happiness. I decided to stomp around some more.

"Maybe Holloway doesn't like surprises," Dad said. "Did you think about that? This is his first Christmas with us. Maybe he always guesses his gifts."

"In my family, we don't give each other gifts," Holmes said matter-of-factly.

Dad lowered the paper long enough to give me a look. I'd gotten enough of them in my life to recognize the I-expect-better-of-you dagger to the heart. I made a face. Dad made a face back. I made a worse face. Dad pulled the paper up. That's the thing about Dad: he's a sore loser.

I went back to the living room. "Do you like surprises?"

He considered the question. "I think so. I don't know. I've never been surprised."

It was hard to tell sometimes when he was joking. “I know you’ve been surprised. I’ve seen you be surprised.”

“Yes, but I meant—”

I waited.

“I choose not to complete that sentence,” Holmes said.

I scowled some more, but my heart wasn’t really in it; he was just too damn cute. I pointed to a present under the tree.

“Lip balm,” he said.

“That was easy. The only reason you guessed that was because I asked you the other day what flavor you liked.”

He gave me a slightly pitying look.

I pointed to another present.

“A hoodie.” He paused. “No, I was wrong.”

“Ha!”

“A Dodgers sweatshirt.”

“What the actual fucking hell?”

“Language,” Dad said.

“Are you listening to this?”

“I certainly heard something.”

“I’ll stop,” Holmes said.

“Oh no,” I said. “No goddamn way.”

We went present by present, and he guessed them all: the box of See’s caramels, the bracelet, the world’s most amazing socks, the cologne. I shit you not, he even guessed the brand.

“I think I’ll like it because I know you like it,” he said. “And I want you to like whatever I’m wearing.”

How in the hell was I supposed to be mad after that?

But Holmes had already moved on to the next present. “Underwear.”

“No, I didn’t get you—hey, wait! That’s my present!” And then, channeling my inner nine-year-old: “Dad!”

“You’ve got holes in your trunks, buddy.”

“My underwear is fine, thanks.”

Holmes gravely shook his head, but that wasn’t as bad as Dad, who said, “When you were walking around the other day, it was like a window onto the Forbidden City.”

“I’m done. I’m leaving. I’m going to find a new family who won’t judge me based solely on my underwear.”

“Jack,” Holmes said, “we don’t judge you solely on your underwear. We judge you on so much more than that.”

Dad actually burst out laughing, and then those two treacherous mofos gave each other a high five.

“Don’t tell Jack his presents, please,” Dad said as he headed for his bedroom—where he’d hidden the Santa presents, the way he always did. “He likes surprises.”

“I don’t like getting underwear for Christmas,” I called after him. “That’s a bad surprise. That’s a disappointment.”

Dad’s only answer was a grunt. A moment later, the sound came of something sliding across the floor. Then Dad pushed a box out into the hall. It was just a cardboard box. No shipping labels. Nothing identifying on the outside. He left it right there, and as he went back to his seat, he tousled Holmes’s hair—which, from anybody else, would have earned an immediate broken wrist. “I think you like surprises too. All kids like surprises.”

Holmes barely seemed to have heard him. He was staring at the cardboard box, eyes narrowed. The last time I’d seen that level of predatory focus, it had been on a velociraptor, and honestly, it was a bit terrifying on Holmes’s face.

“Well,” I said. “Go on.”

Slowly, Holmes got to his feet. He was still staring at the box.

“You can touch it,” Dad said. “But you can’t open it.”

“No,” Holmes murmured as he stalked down the hall, “of course not.”

“What’s in it?” I asked.

“His present.”

“I got him his presents.”

Dad gave me a flat look and went back to his paper.

At the end of the hall, Holmes was circling the box, still staring at it with that unreal intensity. He put a hand on the box. That was all, just laid a hand on it.

“Come on,” I said. “What is it?”

He ignored me. He rocked the box slightly. Something thunked, and Holmes startled back a pair of steps.

“What in the world is going on?” I asked.

“He’s trying to guess his present,” Dad said. “Now help me make dinner.”

“He’s going to guess it in, like, five seconds.”

“That’s great, Jack, but we still need to eat dinner.”

“He’s about to guess it. He’ll get it. Like, right now, he’s going to look up and tell us what it is.”

Holmes’s head did come up. His eyes were wide and a little wild, and he didn’t seem to be seeing me. His voice cracked as he blurted, “A mummified llama.”

Dad burst out laughing and eased himself off the stool. “You’re on chopping duty,”

he told me as he moved around the counter to get started on the meal.

As Dad and I cooked, Holmes poked and prodded and jostled and, eventually, shook the box. He made considering noises. He did searches on his phone. He shouted out guesses.

“Bulk toilet paper.”

“Papier-maché decorative element.”

“A Bastet statue.”

Sometimes, Dad laughed, but most of the time he just said, “Good guess, Holloway,” and kept working.

When I went to get Holmes for dinner, he looked like he was starting to come undone: somehow, his hair was sticking up in back, and he kept rubbing his hands on his chinos as he tried to use his X-ray vision on the box.

“No more guessing,” I said as I took his arm.

“I’ve almost got it.”

“Dinner,” I said. “And then it’s family time.”

“Interesting,” Dad said from the kitchen. “The last time I told you we were having family time, you escaped out a window.”

Holmes was trying to slip free. “Jack, I really do almost have it.”

“H, it’s a stupid box with a stupid present inside.”

“Hey,” Dad called.

“We’re spending Christmas Eve together. Who cares about it? You’ll open it tomorrow.”

For a moment, Holmes didn’t seem to have heard me. Then some of the crazy went out of his face. “Right. Of course. Yes, Jack, you’re very right. I’m so sorry.”

So, we went to eat dinner. Dad had done ribeyes, which were definitely not built into the grocery budget, and garlic mashed potatoes, and I ate mine and half of Holmes’s before Dad could stop me. Holmes was never much of an eater, but tonight, he barely even touched his food. He didn’t look at the box, but I could tell where a hundred and ten percent of that giant brain was focused. He ate when I nudged him. Finally, with something like despair, he looked at Dad and moaned, “If I could have a scale.”

Dad pretended to consider it. I’d seen him do that look too. Then he shook his head and said, “Sorry, buddy. I don’t think so.”

Holmes looked like he might cry.

I refused to let him go back to the box, although a couple of times he tried to sneak away, and once I caught him prowling around it after he’d gone to the bathroom. I gave him jobs to do. We moved the furniture out of the living room and made beds on the floor next to the tree. That had been one stipulation for Holmes being allowed to spend the night: we would not be sleeping in my room. Holmes did everything I told him to, but his movements were mechanical and automatic.

When I cornered Dad in the kitchen, I said, “You broke his brain.”

“Are you kidding? He’s loving this. He’s been bored to tears, and this is like catnip for him.”

“He hasn’t been bored to tears! And he should be hanging out with his boyfriend, not thinking about some stupid box.”

“Sounds like someone is a little jealous of that box.”

“You’re goddamn fucking right I’m jealous!” It got a little screamy at the end.

Dad just grinned. Then the grin faded. He checked behind me, where I could hear Holmes puttering about with the blankets, and put a hand on my shoulder: heavy, a hard grip. He looked me in the eye. And then, in a low voice, he said, “Son, I am not an idiot. And I am well aware that I can’t control what you and Holloway do when you’re alone.”

“Oh my God,” I muttered.

“But this is a small house, and I am a light sleeper, and that boy is tremendously vulnerable right now.” His fingers bit into my shoulder. “Do I make myself painfully clear?”

“Yes, God, yes!” I twisted out from under his grip. “And now I’m going to need shoulder surgery and physical therapy—”

Dad crossed his arms.

“—and therapy-therapy for the trauma of having you talk about that in, uh, here.”

That didn’t seem to shake him. He stared at me a little longer and then, to add insult to injury, said, “A very light sleeper, Jack Sixsmith.”

“I said okay!”

Eventually, Dad went to his room. I turned off all the lights except the tree, and Holmes and I merged our makeshift beds and got under the blankets together. His body was stiff, and I could feel the nervous energy running through him. I tried snuggling up to him. I tried sending psychic commands like Cuddle! and Cuddle now! He was still thinking about that stupid box.

“All right,” I said. “Tell me about it.”

The words tumbled out of him. “It might be a television. Even though your father won’t allow me to use a scale, I have a rough estimate of the weight, and for a TV that size, the weight might be right. But then one must consider the dimensions of both the box and the object inside, which we know do not conform precisely because the object is able to shift inside the box.”

He went on like that for a long time.

After about eight minutes of listening to Holmes analyze the sounds he had been able to hear from the box, I texted Dad: Please tell me or I’m never going to get to sleep .

Composition bubbles appeared. Disappeared.

I thought, with something like a wail of horror building inside me, that this was how my sex life died. My father had just invented the ultimate cockblock.

But then the bubbles came again, and a moment later, a message appeared. A jerky pinata.

I stared at the message for what felt like a long time. You have got to be shitting me .

Dad sent back the emoji with the swear word thing over its mouth. And then a second message came through. Go ahead and tell him.

“Jack, I just had the most marvelous thought.” Holmes propped himself up on one elbow. “What if the object I can hear inside the box is simply a vessel for something else? All my guesses could have been wrong. What if it’s something quite small. For example, a brass button. Or a bottle opener. Or a fountain pen!”

I thought of all the nights I’d stayed up as a kid, dreaming about what I was going to find when I opened my presents. Fountain pens had never made the list, but I thought maybe the feeling was the same. And I thought about how Holmes had said, In my family, we don’t give each other gifts . I smiled at him as I put away my phone and said, “Fountain pen is a good guess. What else do you think it could be?”

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 10:44 am

The Adventures of Holloway Holmes: Jack and Holmes go to the .

“Because it’s going to be fun,” I said as I pushed open the door to the .

The bell rang overhead, only barely audible as it competed with the electronic zaps, zips, bings, and synthesized screams of dozens of different video games. It was overwhelming, but in a good way, if that makes any sense. My dad had brought me here a few times as a kid, and little had changed. It still smelled like stale popcorn. It still had the same high-traffic carpeting soiled by decades of slush and salt. And it still was absolutely, unquestionably, indisputably fucking awesome.

“You keep saying that,” Holmes said.

He studied the aisles of arcade games. Most of the people here on a weeknight evening were either teenagers looking for a place to hang out or college kids—who were either also looking for a place to hang out, or, more frequently, on the world’s cringiest date. But who was I to judge?

“What, exactly, is the appeal?” he asked.

“The fun part. And the funness. And all the funnery.”

Holmes gave me a flat look.

“You’re going to love it,” I said as I steered him toward the prize counter. I fished out a twenty—ignoring Holmes’s reach for his wallet—and as I fed the bill into the change machine, I nodded at the shelves behind the counter. They were lined with

toys, with each section designated by the number of tickets you needed to win each prize. The bottom rows were the dumb stuff—enormous lollipops, plastic eggs of goop, a deck of playing cards. Higher up were the real prizes, like plushies, a sword that lit up when you smacked somebody with it, an enormous slinky, and the jackpot: a miniature air hockey table. “Plus, I need you to win lots of tickets so I can get that air hockey table.”

“What in the world are you going to do with a miniature air hockey table?”

“Put it in your dorm room.”

“Absolutely not.”

“H, it would be so fire! You’d be the only person at school who had one.”

“Because it’s hideous. And it’s pointless. And it’s tiny.”

“It’s miniature. That’s why it’s dope. Besides, it would be so fun! We could play it whenever we wanted.”

“I don’t want to play it.”

“Fine. Then I’ll keep it in my room. And I won’t let you play it even if you ask.”

“I have no idea how you think that’s a threat.”

Quarters jangled as they spilled into a plastic bucket.

“Rowe would totally understand how awesome that thing is.”

“Is this the same Rowe who spent an unfortunate amount of time the other day

delivering a prepared speech on why candy pumpkins taste better than candy corn because, quote, ‘they don’t have to glue the different colors together?’”

“I know you’re being snarky,” I said as I gave Holmes his half of the coins, “but Rowe’s on to something.”

“If it’s a , shouldn’t these be nickels instead of quarters?”

“It’s called inflation, my guy.”

Holmes huffed his little breath-laugh. He glanced around the arcade, and a familiar helplessness settled into his expression. “What am I supposed to do?”

“You’re supposed to have fun,” I said. “Wander around. Try a few games.” I kissed his cheek, and he immediately blushed. “Oh, and win me lots of tickets so I can get my air hockey table.”

This earned me another of those flat looks. I blew him a kiss as I left.

I’d done my research. I’d come prepared. The best way to win tickets at a place like the (according to my deep dive into the Redditverse) was the plinko game, then the fishing game, and then the basketball game.

I started with plinko, which turned out to be a bad name. It was actually one of those coin-pusher games—you load your quarters in, and there are already about a hundred other quarters in there, and you hope that your coins (and a lot of the other coins) get pushed off the ledge, and you win a bunch of tickets.

That, however, was not my experience.

After a couple of rounds, I gave up. I was heading for the fishing game when I

spotted Holmes at the Skee-Ball machines. He wasn't playing; he was just standing there, bucket dangling from one hand, watching a group of girls take turns.

"H, have you even tried any of the games?"

He glanced at me, as though he hadn't noticed me until then, and then said, "I'm observing."

"You're not supposed to observe. You're supposed to play. Oh, you know what you should try? There's this game where you can rip out somebody's guts and strangle them with their own intestines."

He made a noise that meant he clearly hadn't heard me.

"H!"

"Go away, Jack. I'm busy."

From somebody else, that might have sounded harsh; fortunately, I knew how to read between the lines so I could hear the unspoken part of You're such a good boyfriend, and I'm having the best time, and thank you for making my life richer in every way imaginable .

The fishing game ate ass, it turned out.

And the basketball game was totally rigged. I mean, I'm not the world's best shot. It's not like I play on a team. But I shoot hoops with Rowe sometimes. I'm athletic. I like sports. I've got good hand-eye coordination—proof: I always catch the stuff Holmes throws at me when I bother him while he's studying. (Even the stapler.)

But by the time I'd emptied my bucket of quarters, I had one lousy handful of tickets,

and I swear to God, the electronic scoreboard on the basketball game was gloating.

I made my way to the prize counter, weighed my tickets (yes, weighed), and stared at the appallingly low number.

Nowhere close to the ten thousand tickets I needed for the air hockey table.

Not even a thousand tickets.

For three hundred tickets, according to the numbered sections on the prize wall, I could get a single, prepackaged Pokémon (but they only had Squirtle), or an off-brand SpongeBob SquarePants coloring book, or a fake mustache that looked like it would give me a rash.

Even my usual backup tactics didn't work.

"Sixty bucks," I said. "That's my final offer."

The guy behind the counter, in his early twenties and already resorting to a slicked-back look to conceal hair loss, said, "Sorry, man." And then, as though taking pity on me, he added, "Maybe your friend will give you some of his tickets."

When I found Holmes, he was playing Skee-Ball. And he was almost knee deep in tickets. They twisted and curled and snaked in a single, continuous strand that led back to the machine where, as I watched, it spat out more tickets as Holmes landed another ball in the center hole.

"H," I said. And then, for want of anything better, "Holy shit."

"Jack, this game is far more complicated than I realized." The words spilled out of him so quickly I could barely follow. "I accounted for the angle of release, the initial

velocity, and the spin.”

I opened my mouth.

But the words kept coming. “And, of course, there’s gravity to be considered, and air resistance, but Jack!” He was almost breathless with excitement. “I didn’t even think about friction or the irregularities in the lane’s surface.”

And then he giggled.

Hand to God.

Scout’s honor.

I was never a Scout, but you get the idea.

“Can you believe it?” he asked with that same unmistakable thrill. “And I’m beginning to suspect there’s a Gaussian distribution to the scores!”

“Uh, great?”

“And Jack!” Excitement warped into outrage. “A boy climbed right up and put the ball in the hole.”

“Oh, yeah, kids do that all the—”

“And a girl was throwing them! Which completely defeats the purpose of the game.”

“How did you pick what is literally the most boring game in the world and find a way to get excited about it? There’s no blood. There aren’t any cool graphics. You don’t even get to punch somebody in the face so hard that their eye pops out.”

Holmes shoved the bucket at me. “I need more quarters.” He kicked at the tickets tangled around his legs. “And remove these.”

I opened my mouth to object. And then I remembered not just the air hockey table, but that giant slinky. I kissed his cheek, and he waved me off with an annoyed hiss.

Grinning, I trotted toward the change machine.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 10:44 am

The DuPage Parish Mysteries: Eli's plans for New Year's Eve take a turn.

The address was for an unmarked door set into a beaten-down brick building. On one side, it was attached to a crumbling Creole townhouse, and on the other, to a concrete shell of a building that had its doors and windows sealed with plywood. A streetlight at the end of the block provided the only illumination.

I tried to think confident thoughts.

Apparently, it wasn't working, though, because Dag asked, "Are you sure this is the right address?"

"My phone is sure."

He frowned as he parked.

This might, technically, have been the French Quarter, but only barely. No tourists thronged the sidewalks. Nobody was doing any kind of thronging anywhere, as far as I could tell. We had this block to ourselves, with only the distant thud of bass as a reminder that the rest of New Orleans was celebrating New Year's Eve in style.

Dag frowned as he studied the block. He looked—well, perfect, of course. The blazer-and-sweater combo that emphasized the strength of his body. The military-short cut of beautiful gray hair. He fixed me with a look.

"Let me see that invitation."

“It’s not an invitation, it’s a gift.”

“E.”

“From your parents.”

He held out a hand.

“And they gave it to me,” I said, “not you. You’re lucky I asked you to be my plus one.”

“Lucky you asked me to get murdered with you, you mean.”

“Oh my God, stop. It’s perfectly safe. Plus, you’re going to protect me.”

As we got out of the car, he said, “And who’s going to protect me?”

“I don’t know. We’ll figure that out as we go along.”

The nice thing about being with Dag—one of the nice things—was that he took it all in stride. He didn’t even roll his eyes anymore.

“What’s this place called?” he asked as we walked toward the unmarked door.

It was called The Plundering Hole, but there was no way I was going to tell him that.

“I don’t remember.”

“Uh-huh.”

“Dagobert LeBlanc, I don’t like that tone. This is a fancy New Year’s Eve party. It’s exclusive. It was frighteningly expensive. And your parents paid for it as a wonderful, thoughtful gift.”

“For you,” he said drily.

“And I invited you because I’m such a thoughtful partner.”

We made it three more paces before he said, in an unusually stern tone, “What aren’t you telling me?”

The other thing about my wonderful boyfriend? Even though he would disagree, he had been an excellent cop.

“Here we are,” I said.

He gave me another look—a little more pointed, this time—but he still opened the door for me. He is, after all, a gentleman.

Inside, we found ourselves in a small lobby. The walls were a dingy cream color, and a faded mural was traced on the ceiling. Three walk-up windows and a security door were set into the wall ahead of us, and behind one of the windows, an older man with a harness and a walrus mustache and not much else was waiting.

“Eli,” Dag said.

I stepped up to the window. “Hi. We’re here for the New Year’s Eve party.” I slid the tickets through the pass-through.

The man took the tickets, but his eyes were still on me, moving up and down with no attempt to hide it. He scanned the tickets. He was still looking at me. He passed the tickets back and then produced two towels. As he slid them to me, he said, “Once the party starts, we close the front door, and the staff gets to play.”

“Uh...huh.”

“They let me use one of the playrooms exclusive.”

“Thank you,” I said and took the towels.

“I’ll let your buddy watch.”

Sometimes, the best answer is a smile. I think Mary Tyler Moore said that.

“Did he say he has a private playroom?” Dag asked.

I caught his arm and steered him toward the door. A moment later, it buzzed, and we stepped through. “He said a play. Like a one-act play. I think that’s what he meant.”

Dagobert LeBlanc was many things, but he was not an idiot.

A short hallway led us to a locker room without the actual lockers. There was tile. And benches. And a row of showers. A middle-aged guy was standing under the spray, scrubbing his belly. A sign said, ALL PATRONS MUST SHOWER BEFORE USING THE POOLS. To our right, a twink with green hair and press-on nails and a studded codpiece stood at a counter. A sign behind him said COMPLIMENTARY CLOTHING CHECK.

“Eli,” Dag said again, his voice rising.

“It’s optional,” I said breezily. Breezy worked sometimes. I waved to the twink and propelled Dag toward the door on the opposite side of the room.

“Excuse me,” the twink said. “You’ve got to check your clothes here.”

“We’re fine,” I said.

“It’s not optional! Hey!”

“Eli,” Dag snapped. And all of a sudden, he planted himself. It was like he turned to stone. I couldn’t pull him. I couldn’t drag him. I would have had better luck getting that codpiece off the twink (okay, in all fairness, the codpiece probably would have come off fairly easily). With what sounded like an effort to control his volume, Dag said, “Invitation. Now.”

“I told you, it’s not an invitation—”

“Now.” He didn’t shout, but there was no mistaking the authority in his voice.

The twink purred and rubbed his belly against the countertop.

With a sigh, I handed over the flyer that had accompanied the tickets.

“In my defense,” I said in a small voice, “I thought, you know, we could keep our clothes on.”

Dagobert was still reading the flyer.

“And it was so sweet of your parents.”

“My parents,” he said without looking up, “are sex fiends.”

The man under the shower was singing a song about bussy that sounded oddly catchy. He had a lovely baritone.

“And we don’t have any gay friends.” The words exploded out of me in a rush. “And I wanted to go to a fancy New Year’s Eve party. And I know you hate clubs, and I thought maybe this would be, um, more low-key—”

“This,” Dag interrupted. “You thought this would be more low-key?” He read from the flyer. “Spend your New Year’s Eve at The Plundering Hole with special guest

Tommy Ten-Inch.’ You thought that would be more low-key?’

“Well, your mom said—”

“Eli, I honestly will never be able to have sex again if you finish that sentence.”

“Okay, but—”

“Fully stocked private playrooms. That wasn’t a clue?”

My face prickled. My eyes grew hot. I shrugged.

He let out a slow, long breath. Then he said, “I’m wearing that towel the whole time.”

“What?”

“Come on, let’s do this. But I’m not taking off the towel. And I’m not—” His face was on fire. “I’m not sharing you, if you think that’s going to happen. But if you want to go inside, well, that’s okay. We can give it a try.”

I stared at him.

“What?” he asked.

I kept staring.

Dag scowled. “That’s a little rude, you know.”

“I love you so much.”

He did roll his eyes for that.

“Like, so much. More than I could ever tell you. I love you so much that it hurts. It honestly hurts, Dag.”

“That’s very sweet—” He lowered his voice. “—but that man in the shower is listening, and I think he’s, uh, liking it a little too much.” When I still didn’t say anything, he asked, “Do you want to change here, or—”

“Oh God, no. No way. We’re getting out of here right now.”

“I thought you wanted gay friends and a fancy New Year’s Eve—”

“Dagobert, they want us to get naked. And I ate a beignet this week.”

He got that little furrow he gets when I say something he doesn’t like (here’s a shock: it happens more often than you’d think), and he opened his mouth to say something. Before he could, though, the door to the inner portion of the club flew open, and two men stumbled out.

One was tall and muscular, with an athlete’s build, although he was getting a bit of a donut around the middle (hey, who am I to talk?). The other was slender, his hair starting to thin. The bigger guy was frantically re-wrapping his towel, but the elastic band of his boxers (teddy bear print) was still visible.

A slab of beef in a riveted harness stood framed by the doorway. “If you’re not going to take off your clothes, then get the fuck out.”

Then he went back inside and slammed the door behind him.

“Yeah, well, fuck you!” shouted the bigger guy. Yanking the towel tighter, he turned toward the slender man. “Demmy, I am going to kill Jugs.”

“He was trying to be nice,” the smaller man—Demmy, apparently—said. “It was a

gift.”

“Some fucking gift! We’re a thousand miles from home, and he’s still finding ways to mess with us.”

“He didn’t—”

“That guy tried to do a half-nelson on my johnson!”

“I honestly have no idea what that means.”

The bigger guy drew himself up to respond, but he stopped and stared at us. “Enjoying the show?”

“Sorry,” Dag said. “We were just leaving.”

“Not really our scene,” I added. “Not when I had a cheat week, I mean.”

The bigger guy was still staring, but Demmy covered a smile. “Come on,” he said in a consoling voice, “we’ll find somewhere else—”

“On New Year’s Eve?” he asked. “Demmy, everywhere’s going to be booked. God, I am going to murder him.”

I glanced at Dag. Dag gave me a crooked eyebrow, and I knew what he was thinking: Gay friends. But then he shrugged.

“Actually,” I said, “we were just going to try this cute little bar we know. It’s a hole in the wall, so I bet we can get a table.” I waited, and when neither of them said anything, I added, “If you want to join us, I mean. It sounds like you’re not from here, and I thought...”

“Is this some kind of foursome thing?” the muscular guy asked.

“Cody,” Demmy said. “They’re just being nice! It’s called southern hospitality.”

“Does southern hospitality come with a foursome?”

“It’s not a foursome,” Dag said—in my opinion, a little more forcefully than necessary.

“But we’re open to the idea,” I said.

“No.” Dag put a hand on my neck, which, weirdly, can communicate a whole hell of a lot. “We’re not.”

For some reason, that made the bigger guy—Cody—grin. He glanced at Demmy, and then he said, “Sure. Why not?”

It only took them a few minutes to collect their clothes and change. While they did, Dag pulled me aside.

“You’re sure about this?”

“They seem nice. And they were so sad about their vacation being ruined.”

He studied me for a moment. His mouth eased into a smile. “You’re such a softy.”

“Plus, I want a foursome.”

“Good God, Eli.”

We headed out together. Nobody said anything, and the silence grew as we walked toward the car. I asked the first question that popped into my head.

“So, what do you guys do for work?”